

Article published May 30, 2005 *Gainesville Sun*

## **Elderly soldiers face shortage of nursing homes**

Unable to care for himself because of deteriorating hands that surgery failed to help, Ed McDermott says he was forced out of a Florida nursing home last year when Medicare and his private insurer wouldn't pay anymore.

McDermott stayed with friends in Fort Myers for a while, but they weren't equipped to help him with daily tasks, like bathing.

He was lucky, though. A veteran of World War II, McDermott got into the federally subsidized Douglas T. Jacobson State Veterans Nursing Home in Port Charlotte last October.

Thousands of other vets, however, won't be so fortunate as the federal government pulls back nursing home services for veterans.

"They're going to leave a lot that served with no place to go," McDermott said.

Old soldiers never die in the history books or monuments to their deeds, but far less certain is where they'll go to fade away.

McDermott turns 85 on Wednesday, putting him in the surging ranks of the oldest veterans and among the many needing long-term care. Veterans 85 and older are on track to double from 2002 to 2012, when they will peak at more than 1.3 million.

### **Skirting the issue**

The government has failed to prepare.

Big retirement states like Florida are in such trouble that an official for the Department of Veterans Affairs - Dr. James Burris, VA's chief internal consultant for geriatrics and extended care - acknowledged in an interview last week there is no hope for meeting nursing home demand there in the short time left to catch up.

And the Bush administration wants to stop building veterans nursing homes. Barring a major spending spree, it might be too late anyway.

"We don't want to ramp up and build a lot of bricks and mortar and after that peak see a decline and be left with a lot of empty buildings," Burris said.

Instead, the VA is cutting back on nursing home services and increasing in-home care, hoping the private sector and Medicaid, the federal-state program for the poor, can absorb the aging vets that will need beds.

Many experts, however, say the unprepared VA system foreshadows the plight of the nation as a whole, which faces a similar boom for long-term care as the children of World War II veterans age.

"VA hasn't adjusted anymore than anybody else," said Donald Mooney, assistant director of veterans affairs and rehabilitation at the American Legion. "VA has just kind of skirted the issue, ignored it for the last 20 years."

Indeed, a landmark VA report in 1984 warned of this problem.

Last year, the department produced a plan - called Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services, or CARES - to shift resources such as hospitals and clinics to states and regions where veterans have moved over the decades. The department left out nursing homes and mental-health care, however, saying it couldn't devise accurate models.

### **Shortage of beds**

Now the administration proposes to halt construction of state veterans homes for 2006 while the VA studies what to do.

States operate 119 state veterans homes with VA subsidies, Medicaid and resident fees that are often on an ability-to-pay basis. Built with federal help, the state facilities house about half of all veterans in long-term care.

The VA operates 130 nursing homes and contracts with dozens of privately owned facilities. VA nursing homes have about 12,000 beds, but the administration wants to cut that next year to 9,795. The VA already is violating a 1999 federal law that required a minimum of 13,391 beds.

Paralyzed Veterans of America said that based on VA data, the system will need almost 10,000 new nursing home beds by 2013.

Administration policy, however, is heading in the opposite direction. President Bush's plan would cut VA, contract and state beds to 22,228 by 2013 from about 36,000.

"It's really sad there's not better facilities for our veterans because they've given so much of themselves," said Joan Jacobson, widow of the Medal of Honor winner whose name is on the Port Charlotte home.

Unless space allows, the VA proposes an admission policy that would limit nursing home beds to certain vets with service-connected disabilities and veterans with special needs. The VA wants to apply the policy not only to VA facilities and private beds under contract, but also to state veterans homes. States now set their own eligibility criteria, which often are much lower than existing standards for VA beds.

That policy change would make up to 80 percent of potential residents of state veterans homes ineligible, according to the national Association of State Veterans Homes. McDermott, for example, wouldn't qualify.

### **Safe haven?**

Last week the House passed a spending bill that would prevent the VA from imposing the policy on state homes. The Senate is expected to follow suit, although it hasn't taken up the bill yet. Veterans are nervous the proposal signals deeper shifts.

If the House version holds, the VA says it still would apply the policy to new patients at VA nursing homes and contract facilities.

The House also provided \$25 million for renovation and new construction of state nursing homes, but that's compared to \$104 million provided this year. President Bush asked for no construction money, instead proposing a new study.

Lourdes Alvarado-Ramos, president of the National Association of State Veterans Homes, said \$25 million would fund some urgent repairs but not new construction.

That would affect dozens of planned projects around the country. The Florida Department of Veterans Affairs, for example, is counting on federal money next year to build its sixth nursing home. The estimated federal share is \$9.2 million.

"We ask our veterans to do an awful lot," said Greg Puckett, program director for state veterans homes in Florida. "To me, it's a very, very small price to pay for the defense and freedom of our country."

Including an assisted living facility in Lake City and five nursing homes, Florida operates 750 beds for veterans. Puckett said data shows the state system needs 4,471 beds. Florida had an estimated 69,101 veterans 85 and older in 2002 but is expected to have 129,705 in 2012, a close second to California.

Puckett said the department intentionally keeps waiting lists short to avoid giving false hope to the aged.

VA officials expect big increases for home and community-based care to delay or prevent many veterans from needing nursing home beds. The VA wants to spend \$400 million on those services in 2006, compared to \$287 million last year.

VA officials say private insurance and Medicaid, the major federal spender on long-term stays, must fund much of the need for nursing homes.

"It is clear that VA alone cannot possibly provide nursing home care for all the veterans projected to need such care over the next decade," Dr. Jonathan Perlin, undersecretary for health, recently told the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee.

Richard Fuller, legislative director for Paralyzed Veterans of America, said the VA is giving up on a traditional mission. "The VA has always been the haven, and the place you take care of old soldiers."